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transport; there is no flat desert, as at Sharjah, suitable for an air-field, and the mountain ranges are too close for safe flying.

In parenthesis, I learnt that shortly after the Sheikh of Sharjah had agreed to lease his land to the British for the purposes of an airfield, he was secretly murdered by a hired assassin, who crept into his palace while he slept, put his eyes out with a red-hot iron, and slit his throat. The present ruler of Sharjah, Sultan bin Saqr, never sleeps without an armed bodyguard outside his room, and it is whispered that he is waiting to avenge the murder of his father. He has little doubt who instigated the crime.

An old retainer of the Khan Sahib's, a wrinkled Arab with a henna-dyed beard, Ali bin Achmed, came to talk to us. He is employed as a seaman and looks after the petrol dhow on which the emergency stocks provided by the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company are stored. He is a distinguished-looking old man, with a fund of stories which he related to us as the sun sank slowly behind the sandhills and the palm trees leant in ragged silhouette against the sapphire-tinted horizon.

The Khan Sahib closed the shutters, lighted a perfumed coil of anti-mosquito powder, and hung a kerosene lamp from a hook in the ceiling. A slave brought us dishes of rice, steamed lamb, curry balls, chipatties, *haloua*, fruit and turkish delight, and, feeling ravenous, we ate in silence, seated on Persian rugs with our legs tucked underneath us in Arab style.

After the third cup of clove-scented coffee, we sat in the dim light, smoking cigarettes, while Ali bin Achmed puffed away at his tiny pipeful of hashish. He told us wild stories of shipwrecks on the rocks, and of pirates who plundered the unfortunate vessels and held the passengers to ransom; of British gunboats which shelled the village in reprisal and clapped the headmen in gaol. Then he spoke of the wild men of the mountains, the Shi'hou tribe, who seldom left their dark caves in the hills, and who lived on fish, wild honey and dates. They never mixed with the lowland Arabs, were greatly feared on account of their wild appearance and cruel habits, and were believed to be in league with a djinn.

'There is gold and tin in the mountains,' said Ali, 'but men will not seek for it on account of these wild ones. A man would be rich who dared to climb those cruel slopes and search for the gleaming metal. But, praise be to Allah, it would be a foolhardy enterprise.'

The Shi'hou tribe is a very ancient one, according to Ali, and

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186 563 inhabited the mountain caves long before the present Arabs, who are mostly farmers and fishermen, came to live in the valleys and date plantations. It is said by some (he added) that they are descendants of Sinbad, the sailor hero of the *Arabian Nights*, who was born at Zubair, near Basra, where the Euphrates joins forces with the Shatt-al-Arab river. In these mountains the fabulous Giant Roc, *rukh* in Arabic, is said to have had a lair from which he would carry gold and precious stones, as well as pearls, to his island fortress near Aden.

'It was probably nothing more than a *na'qr* (eagle),' broke in the Khan Sahib with a chuckle, but Ali would have none of this.

'No, Sahib, it was a giant bird with a spread of wings that shadowed the land for miles and struck fear into the hearts of men,' he said, uttering a '*Bismillah*' to protect himself from evil.

'Tush!' said the Khan Sahib. 'Then it was a *na'sir* (vulture)', and Ali, thus affronted, fell into a sulky silence and puffed away at his pipe, and we did not hear more of his stories that night.

352 ●354 357 The Khan Sahib began to yawn sleepily and presently asked us if we were ready to retire. He conducted us along a white-walled gallery to our sleeping quarters, a low-ceilinged room containing half a dozen charpoys and a brazier of smouldering charcoal. Feeling drowsy, we undressed quickly and were soon half asleep. Outside the veranda a watchman chanted songs of praise to Allah; a pai dog bayed at the moon, and the fronded leaves of the palms whispered secrets to the night.